

## **History of the Southeastern Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society.**

After studying all available resources, I have concluded that Dr. Ernest Yelton was the moving force that caused this chapter to be formed.

Dr. Yelton said that he was growing Azaleas and Camellias in 1954. In the fall of that year he wanted to buy some more Azaleas. He drove to Travelers Rest to visit a nursery owned and operated by Rudolph Anderson. While there he saw a small plant covered with red flowers. It was a grafted hybrid Rhododendron. It had been imported from a nursery in England. The price was five dollars. He declined to make the purchase but couldn't get the beauty of the red flowers out of his mind.

With the arrival of spring, Mrs. Yelton decided to visit the Nursery to buy more azaleas. Dr. Yelton told her that if the nursery should happen to have some of the pretty red Rhodies to buy one of them. She was able to get one and proudly brought it home for him. He selected a spot for the Rhodie and dug a hole in red clay and carefully planted it. The plant bloomed that spring. It clung to life for two more years before dying, but never bloomed again.

In the meantime Dr. Yelton decided that if he was going to be interested in Rhododendrons and achieve any degree of success in growing them he would need a lot of information. He decided to join the ARS in the spring of 1955. The nearest chapter was the Middle Atlantic in Richmond VA with Dr. Tom Wheeldon as president. He wrote to Dr. Wheeldon asking him about their meetings and programs. Dr. Wheeldon invited him to attend their annual meeting. Dr. Yelton decided that the distance was too great to travel to learn about Rhododendrons. He started visiting nurseries in the area to see what information could be gained. In the meantime he started checking the ARS Bulletin for people joining who had no chapter affiliation. Once in awhile a name would show up in this general area. One was a man named Josiah Brooks who lived between Enka and Asheville and was very enthusiastic about Rhododendrons. Dr. Yelton wrote a letter to him telling of the problem he was having getting information about Rhodies. Mr. Brooks responded immediately that he was having the same problem. He suggested that the two of them should get together a group of people. Both of them screened all their friends without finding anyone who was interested in becoming a member. They decided to start a new Chapter of the ARS in this area. In the meantime they came in contact with Buck Thorne who lived in Asheville and was President of the Asheville Chapter of the Men's Garden Club of America. Mr. Thorne and his wife were very active gardeners and were very happy to meet someone who was interested in growing Rhododendrons. Meeting Mr. Thorne was a blessing in that he was able to get about half of the men in the Garden Club to sign up for the new Rhododendron Society Chapter.

The group held their organizational meeting on March 13, 1957 at the George Vanderbilt Hotel. At this meeting fifteen people signed up, but they decided to keep the membership open for two weeks before sending in the Charter. By doing this they had twenty nine members when they filed their Charter.

The following officers were elected.

Joe Brooks President; Dr. Ernest Yelton, Vice Pres; Buck Thorne, Secretary/Treasurer. When they first approached Dr. Wheeldon with the idea of forming a chapter in Asheville, he told them that there was no need for another chapter in his district. At this time his district reached from New York to Florida and from the Mississippi River to the Atlantic Ocean. But he was very gracious and came down from Richmond two or three times and talked to them about organization and chapter work.

They held plant auctions at their meetings. The members would all bring a plant to be auctioned. The money that was raised was used to bring in knowledgeable speakers.

Dr. William Nicholas Fortescue who was also a Charter member lived in Hendersonville at the Chantaloupe (shon-te-loo) Estate off Erkwood Drive. He was a native azalea expert spending a lot of time driving over the mountains in a jeep looking for unusual and special plants. He collected plant material and seeds from which he developed some very extensive plantings. He had gardens both at Chantaloupe and on a fifty acre track of land off Kanuga Road.

Mr A.J. Overton wasn't a charter member but joined sometime during 1957/1958. He ran a wholesale food business in Hendersonville. His home was on Kanuga Road within the city limits of Hendersonville. He had a nice garden which he had started sometime during the early to mid thirties. The garden came almost to the street and was very visible. It was a sight to behold in the spring. People would drive from miles around to see this beautiful display of color. These two gardens are the only gardens that I am aware of in the Hendersonville area at this time.

Dr. Fortescue was a great promoter of Azaleas. He rooted a lot of them and also bought some from Mr. Anderson's Nursery to sell to the public. They sold about 20,000 plants per year for three years. While Nick Fortescue Jr. was going to high school. Dr. Fortescue had gotten acquainted with Mr. Crayton who worked for Mr. Beadle at the Biltmore Estate. One day while discussing unusual plants, Mr. Crayton told him about a red form of the Rhododendron Maximum which he had discovered while working on the Blue Ridge Parkway during the 1930's. About 1955 they went to see the plant which was indeed red. They discussed this red flowered Max with members of the ARS. This led to a group of the most knowledgeable and well known plant experts from the Northeast traveling here to see it in 1957. Among this group was Dr. Henry Skinner of the National Arboretum. It had been discovered earlier that there were three smaller plants near by also flowering red. Dr. Skinner had secured a permit to remove a plant. Dr. Skinner took the plant to the National Arboretum to be studied and propagated from. Before long the word got out about the mild winters here and the fact that so many different species of Rhododendron and Azaleas naturally occur here also the many beautiful natural hybrids which are found on the nearby Balds. This was very attractive to our Northern friends. Soon some of them started relocating to this area, bringing their vast knowledge of hybridizing, propagating and growing Rhodies and Azaleas. Many of them moved truckloads of their life's work with them. As a result we now have access to several extensive gardens of very rare plants. Many of our members who are native of this area have also developed extensive and beautiful gardens utilizing cuttings from these plants.

The influence of these plant greats has made the Southeastern Chapter what it is today. We have several long time members who were fortunate to have been students of these men and women. They are still today handing down this information and advice thus we still have a link to the wealth of knowledge and information. We still have in our chapter active hybridizers and members with awesome gardens who are willing to share them with others. We have several members who are in the nursery business offering some of the rarest and sought after plants imaginable.

The history that we are making today is just as important as is the history of the past.

Submitted by Leon Pace Chapter Historian

## **Southeastern Chapter American Rhododendron Society**

### **Charter Members**

**March 13, 1957**

Asheville Garden Club, Inc	William N. Fortescue, M.D.*
J.R. "Joe" Brooks *	George W. Gignilliat *
Mrs. Derwood Brown	L.M. Griffith, M.D. *
Joseph L. Carson *	Mrs. George W. Hardaher
W.F.P. Coxe	Gary Harthcock
Mrs. John B. Dennis	W. R. Hoots
Charles A. Dewey, Jr. *	Traynham Houston
L.E. Jarrett	R.L. Montague
L.L. Klostermeyer, M.D.	Fred J. Nisbet, Ph. D.
Mimosas Garden Club	Rex D. Pearce
Alfred E. Kremer	James S. Raper, M.D.
W.F. Lewis	Lewis S. Rathbun, M.D.
Allen T. Lockwood, D.D.S.	H.E. Rogers
Willard H. Lindberg	W.H. Thorne *
Ernest H. Yelton, M.D. *	

\* Members of other chapters of ARS also

In this year 2014 Ernest Yelton is the only living charter member.

Chapter meetings were held in the Biltmore Forest Town Hall until about 1982. At that time the meetings were moved to St. John's Parrish Hall in Flat Rock. This move was made due to a shift in membership more to the Hendersonville-Brevard-and piedmont of North and South Carolina.